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ABSTRACT

In order to provide data to help schools respond to the diversity in the backgrounds and educational needs of children entering school, a U.S. Department of Education study asked parents of 3- to 5-year-old children who had not yet started kindergarten about their children's accomplishments that indicated emerging literacy and numeracy skills and their children's difficulties in physical activity or attention. Results indicated that the percentage of children displaying signs of emerging literacy and small-motor skills increased with age. Developmental difficulties showed small changes across ages. More girls than boys demonstrated literacy and small-motor skills. This gender difference was small, however. Hispanic preschoolers showed fewer signs of emerging literacy, exhibited more difficulties with physical activity or attention, and were in less good general health than white or black children. The study identified five family risk factors: (1) mother has less than a high school education; (2) family is below the poverty line; (3) mother speaks a language other than English as her primary language; (4) mother was unmarried at the time of the child's birth; and (5) only one parent is present in the home. These risk factors, especially low maternal education and minority language status, were found to be associated with fewer accomplishments and more difficulties in children. Attending Head Start, prekindergarten, or other center-based preschool programs have beneficial effects on emerging literacy and numeracy in four-year-olds from both high- and low-risk family backgrounds. However, preschool attendance does not appear to ameliorate behavioral, speech, or health difficulties of preschoolers. (BC)

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School Readiness and Children's Developmental Status

Nicholas Zill, Mary Collins, Jerry West, and Elvie Germino Hausken

Kindergarten is now a nearly universal experience for children in the United States, with 98% of all children attending kindergarten prior to entering first grade. However, the population of children that comes to kindergarten is increasingly diverse. Growing numbers of children in the United States come from different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds; family types; parent education levels; income strata; and language backgrounds. The majority of children come to kindergarten with some experience in center-based programs (such as child care centers or preschools), but the percentage of children with such experience and the quality of these experiences vary across the backgrounds and other characteristics listed above.

Schools in the United States are expected to respond to this diversity in children's backgrounds and educational needs by providing all children with appropriate activities and instruction to ensure that each child begins his or her schooling with a good start. Knowing the range of developmental accomplishments and difficulties that children bring with them when they arrive at kindergarten can help us understand the demands being placed on schools to meet the needs of the entering children. Indeed, some of the difficulties discussed here are not experienced as difficulties until children enter school.

Parents of a national sample of 4,423 children from 3 to 5 years of age who had not yet started kindergarten were asked about specific accomplishments and difficulties of their children. Parents, usually the mother, were asked to rate how well their child demonstrated behaviors indicating emerging literacy and numeracy skills, such as pretending to read stories or counting to 20, and small-motor skills, such as buttoning clothes and holding a pencil properly. Parents were also asked to rate the extent to which their child showed signs of difficulties in physical activity or attention, such as restlessness and inattention, speech difficulties, and less than optimal health. These data were collected in early 1993 as part of a U.S. Department of Education study (Zill et al., 1995).

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Accomplishments and Difficulties

Three- to five-year-olds. The percentage of children displaying signs of emerging literacy and small-motor skills increased with age within the 3- to 5-year-old population and within months of age among 4-year-olds. For example, the percentage of preschoolers reported as able to write their own name more than tripled between ages 3 and 4, while the percentage recognizing most letters of the alphabet more than doubled. Other accomplishments showed more moderate age differences. Developmental difficulties showed much smaller changes across ages, and difficulties in some developmental areas showed no change.

More girls than boys demonstrated each of the literacy and small-motor skills covered in the survey, and more boys than girls exhibited signs of difficulties with physical activity, attention, or speech. Though differences between boys and girls were widespread, they were not large.

Hispanic preschoolers were reported to show fewer signs of emerging literacy and more indication of difficulties with physical activity or attention, and to be in less good general health than White or Black children. Controlling for related risk factors, such as a mother with limited education and minority language status, reduced these ethnic differences but did not eliminate them. Black preschoolers showed fewer signs of emerging literacy and were more likely to be reported as in less than good health than White preschoolers. Differences between races were wholly accounted for by related risk factors, such as low maternal education, poverty, and single parenthood.

Four-year-olds. A majority of the 4-year-olds in the study displayed each of the small-motor skills and signs of emerging literacy asked about in the survey. The proportion of children displaying each of these behaviors varied greatly across specific accomplishments, however. More than 9 out of 10 were able to button their own clothes and hold a pencil properly, and more than 8 out of 10 were able to identify the primary colors by name. Fewer, about 6 in 10, could count to 20 or recognize most letters of the alphabet.

Much smaller proportions of preschoolers exhibited any developmental difficulties, although a substantial minority displayed signs of difficulties with physical activity or attention. At age 4, nearly 3 in 10 were reported to be very restless and fidgety and nearly 1 in 4 to have short attention spans. Nearly 1 in 8 was reported by their parents to be in less than very good health. About 1 in 13

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were reported to stutter, stammer, or speak in a way that is not understandable to a stranger.

Family Risk Factors and 4-Year-Olds

Sociodemographic risk factors that have been found to be associated with problems in learning after children start school are also correlated with the accomplishments and difficulties children bring with them when they arrive at kindergarten. Five family risk factors were examined:

- mother has less than a high school education;
- family is below the official poverty line;
- mother speaks a language other than English as her primary language;
- mother was unmarried at the time of the child's birth; and
- only one parent is present in the home.

Half of today's preschoolers are affected by at least one of these risk factors, and 15% are affected by three or more of them.

The risk factors are found to be associated with fewer accomplishments and more difficulties in children, even after other child and family characteristics are taken into account. The relative importance of individual risk factors varies across developmental domains. Nevertheless, low maternal education and minority language status are most consistently associated with fewer signs of emerging literacy and a greater number of difficulties in preschoolers.

Attending Head Start, prekindergarten, or other center-based preschool programs was linked to higher emerging literacy scores in 4-year-olds. This correlation remained statistically significant when other child and family characteristics were taken into account. This benefit of preschool attendance accrued to children from both high-risk and low-risk family backgrounds. On the other hand, preschool attendance was found not to be associated with fewer behavioral or speech difficulties or with better health status in preschoolers.

Conclusion

The results of the study point to a need for innovative approaches in providing early education services for children from low-socioeconomic circumstances. As previous studies have shown, existing preschool programs have beneficial effects in the area of emerging literacy and numeracy. But they do not appear to be ameliorating the behavioral, speech, and health difficulties of preschoolers.

The survey results also emphasize the value of a multifaceted concept of educational risk. Five different risk factors were employed in the present study. All were found to have some relationship to preschoolers' accomplishments and difficulties, although the pattern of relationships varied across developmental domains. Many observers believe that low family income is the key factor behind educational failure, but the results of this research do not support this view. When compared to low family income, the risk factors of low maternal education, minority language status, and family structure were often as good or better predictors of the child's developmental accomplishments and difficulties.

By showing the considerable variation that exists in the accomplishments and difficulties of children about to start school, the study highlights the challenges that kindergarten teachers face in meeting the needs of children who are not only demographically but also developmentally diverse. Teachers must maintain the interest and promote the growth of children who have already demonstrated signs of early literacy and numeracy while simultaneously encouraging the development of these behaviors in children who have not yet acquired them. Similarly, they must meet the needs of children with difficulties while reserving sufficient attention and effort for those with few or no difficulties. Although there has always been variation in the characteristics of children entering kindergarten, the commitment to meeting the educational and developmental needs of all children in an increasingly diverse society presents great challenges to teachers, schools, and communities.

Adapted from: Zill, Nicholas, Mary Collins, Jerry West, and Elvie Germino Hausken. (1995). Approaching Kindergarten: A Look at Preschoolers in the United States. *Young Children* 51(1, Nov): 35-38. PS 524 215. Adapted with permission of *Young Children* and the authors.

For More Information

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